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ABSTRACT

Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized three mechanisms by which members of stigmatized groups may protect self-esteem. The mechanisms are: (1) in-group social comparisons; (2) valuing/devaluing performance selectively; and (3) racial prejudice. A test of Crocker and Major's hypothesized mechanisms was produced with the development of the Protective Style Questionnaire (PSQ) which was administered to a sample of 78 African-American adolescents. Scores obtained from the PSQ indicated reliability estimates of .89, and high factor loadings supported the orthogonality of the three mechanisms. This study lends support to Crocker and Major's hypothesis that stigmatized people make in-group social comparisons as a way to protect self-esteem. The racial prejudice hypothesis was also endorsed, but less frequently, and the devaluing/valuing performance selectively hypothesis was endorsed sparingly. An appendix reprints the PSQ. Two tables and four figures present data and statistical analysis. (Author/TS)

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SELF-PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS AMONG STIGMATIZED ADOLESCENTS*

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Self-Protective Mechanisms Among Stigmatized Adolescents

Abstract

Crocker and Major (1989) hypothesized three mechanisms by which members of stigmatized groups may protect self-esteem. The mechanisms are: a) ingroup social comparisons, b) valuing/devaluing performance selectively, and c) racial prejudice. We provide a test of Crocker and Major's hypothesized mechanisms with the development of the *Protective Style Questionnaire* which was administered to a sample of 78 African-American adolescents. Scores obtained from the *PSQ* indicated reliability estimates of .89, and high factor loadings supported the orthogonality of the three mechanisms. Results showed varying levels of endorsement for the three mechanisms.

Self-Protective Mechanisms Among Stigmatized Adolescents

A review of social stigma and self-esteem by Crocker and Major (1989) pointed out that "although several psychological theories predict that members of stigmatized groups should have low global self-esteem, empirical research typically does not support this prediction" (p. 608). They argued that this discrepancy could be explained by a number of ways individuals in such groups use self-protective mechanisms to protect self-esteem. Individuals who are stigmatized (due to race, gender, physical disability, etc.) are people for whom others hold negative beliefs or stereotypes. These individuals have likely been negatively impacted in terms of interpersonal and financial outcomes relative to people who are not stigmatized.

There is empirical support for Crocker and Major's (1989) theoretical position on the self-protective properties of stigma. For example, some recent studies on African-American adolescents indicated that a) their global self-concept was significantly higher than reported norms (Wood, Hillman, & Sawilowsky, 1992), b) they were more external in their beliefs about events which control their lives than reported norms (Hillman, Wood, & Sawilowsky, 1992), and c) they viewed themselves as having more influence over positive life events than negative life events (Hillman, Wood, & Sawilowsky, 1994).

Crocker and Major (1989) proposed three mechanisms by which people protect self-esteem. They are a) "the tendency to make ingroup social comparisons" (p. 614) - ingroup common fate, b) "selectively devaluing, or regarding as less important for their self-definition, those performance dimensions on which they or their group fare(s) poorly, and selectively valuing those dimensions on which they or their group excel(s)" (p. 616) - devaluing/valuing performance selectively, and c)

"attributing negative feedback or relatively poor outcomes to the prejudice attitudes of others toward their group" (p. 612) - racial prejudice.

The purpose of this study is to report on the development of the *Protective Style Questionnaire (PSQ)*. This instrument is designed to further understand the use of the three mechanisms by which stigmatized individuals protect self-esteem (Wood et al., 1992) through the use of externalizing attributions when confronted with negative feedback (Hillman et al., 1992; 1994).

Methodology

The adolescents from whom the data were collected were participants in the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) at Wayne State University from 1990 - 1994. The purpose of STEP was to provide a fifteen month intervention (two six-week summer sessions and special support during the intervening academic year) for middle school students who were at-risk for not completing high school. In order to be included in this program, students had to meet the following criteria:

- their families were documented to be below the federally defined poverty level
- they were one to four years behind grade level expectation in academic achievement
- school counselors determined that they were at-risk for dropping out of school (indicators being truancy, low grades, behavior problems, family problems, multiple grade retentions)
- they were 13, 14, or 15 years of age
- enrolled in an urban middle school

Data were collected on 78 African-American urban middle school students. The average age

of the sample was 14.0 years; 37.7% of the students were female and 62.3% of the students were male.

Instrument Development and Administration

The *PSQ* was developed in order to test the use of the three hypothesized mechanisms advanced by Crocker and Major (1989). These hypotheses purport to explain the frequent failure of research studies to find low self-esteem among stigmatized youngsters. The *PSQ* consists of six vignettes. Each vignette describes a negative event which might happen. The text for each vignette was shown to members of the African-American community to validate the plausibility and likelihood of these events occurring in the lives of adolescents. The "A" responses to each vignette refer to Crocker and Major's (1989) ingroup comparisons or shared common fate hypothesis. The "B" responses are derived from their hypothesis of devaluing poor performance or valuing successful performance selectively, and the "C" responses are based on the hypothesis of negative events occurring due to stigmatized group membership, such as race.

Items for the six vignettes were constructed to measure each of the three hypothesized mechanisms. Three items (one for each of the three mechanisms) are linked to each vignette, for a total of 18 items on the initial version of the *PSQ*. The response set is a four point ordinal scale. The degree to which a person agrees with the use of the mechanism in response to the negative experience communicated in the vignette is obtained by endorsement of "NO", "no", "yes", or "YES". (The ordered levels of endorsement are distinguished by use of capitalization.)

A factor analysis was conducted on the data set obtained from the African-American adolescents in the sample. Evidence for a three factor solution, matching the hypothesized three

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mechanisms, is depicted in the Factor Scree Plot in Figure 1. Table 1 indicates factor loadings for the three subscales, and indicates 14 of 18 items loaded on the appropriate subscale with factor loadings $\geq |.4|$. Presented in Figure 2 are the results of a multidimensional scaling, using a Euclidean distance model, which supports the spatial clustering of items in the three factor model.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

(Insert Table 1 about here)

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

The distributions of scores obtained for the three subscales are depicted in Figures 3 - 5. An inspection of Figure 3 indicates a relatively normal (symmetric with light tails) response set for Subscale A. However, Subscales B and C (Figures 4 and 5) indicate a "floor" effect. Despite the depression of scores for the latter two subscales, there was a mild endorsement for C (Racial Prejudice) and pattern of rejection of B (Devaluing/Valuing Performance Selectively) as explanations for the occupance of the negative event.

(Insert Figures 3-5 about here)

Subscale descriptive statistics and estimates of internal consistency reliability are compiled in Table 2.The *PSQ* is presented in the Appendix, including the four items dropped from the analysis due to low factor loadings. The interpretation of the Factor Scree Plot in Figure 2 might be interpreted to indicate a fourth factor, and thus we present the excluded items which could relate to

another mechanism not addressed in the literature.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Discussion

On the basis of the sample of adolescents in this study, the *Protective Style Questionnaire* was shown to have corrected internal consistency reliability estimates of .85, .86, and .88 for the three subscales of ingroup comparison (A), devaluing/valuing performance selectively (B), and racial prejudice (C), respectively. The sorted factor loadings ($\geq |.4|$) further served to identify and support the three subscales, as they relate to Crocker and Major's (1989) three mechanisms.

The study lends support to Crocker and Major's (1989) hypothesis that stigmatized people make ingroup social comparisons (A) as a way to protect self-esteem. The racial prejudice (C) hypothesis was endorsed also, but less frequently, and the devaluing/valuing performance selectively (B) hypothesis was endorsed sparingly.

The *Protective Style Questionnaire* is the first instrument that permits a direct measurement of Crocker and Major's (1989) hypotheses. The results of this study are the only empirical evidence, to date, supporting the use of the hypothesized mechanisms they described for the protection of self-esteem.

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Table 1 Factor loadings (> .40) for *Protective Style Questionnaire* Subscales A (ingroup common fate), B (devaluing/valuing performance selectively), & C (racial prejudice).

Item	Subscale	Factor 1 Subscale A	Factor 2 Subscale B	Factor 3 Subscale C
PSQ1	A	.557		
PSQ4	A	.677		
PSQ7	A	.403		
PSQ10	A	.660		
PSQ13	A	.414		
PSQ16	A	.705		
PSQ2	B		.551	
PSQ5	B		< .4	
PSQ8	B		.410	
PSQ11	B		< .4	
PSQ14	B		.746	
PSQ17	B		.772	
PSQ3	C			.723
PSQ6	C			.495
PSQ9	C			.677
PSQ12	C			< .4
PSQ15	C			< .4
PSQ18	C			.682

Table 2. Subscale Descriptive Data and Reliability Estimates, N=78.

Subscale	# Items	μ	σ	CA	SB
A (Ingroup - Common Fate)	6	14.24	4.1	.66	.85
A'	6	14.24	4.1	.66	.85
B (Devaluing/ Valuing Performance Selectively)	6	9.97	2.7	.36	.63
B'	4	5.51	1.9	.58	.86
C (Racial Prejudice)	6	9.58	2.8	.57	.80
C'	4	7.08	2.5	.61	.88

Note: SB for subscales based on 18 items (total test length). A', B', and C' are based on 3-factor solution.

Appendix - *The Protective Style Questionnaire*

1. You have had trouble finding a better job for some time.
   A. To help myself feel better, I would think about people like me who also had trouble finding better jobs.
   B. Many people like me do not find better jobs, so it's not important to be successful in finding a job.
   C. Is the cause of your unsuccessful job search due to something about your race?

2. You go to a store, ask for change, and the cashier says "no".
   A. To help myself feel better, I would think about people to whom the cashier also said "no".
   B. Many people like me have things like this happen so it's no big deal.
   C. Is the cause of the cashier having said "no" due to something about your race?

3. You do a project for school which gets a low grade.
   A. To help myself feel better, I would think about people like me who also get low grades.
   B. Many people like me do not get good grades so it's not important for me to get good grades.
   C. Is the cause of your low grade on your project due to something about your race?

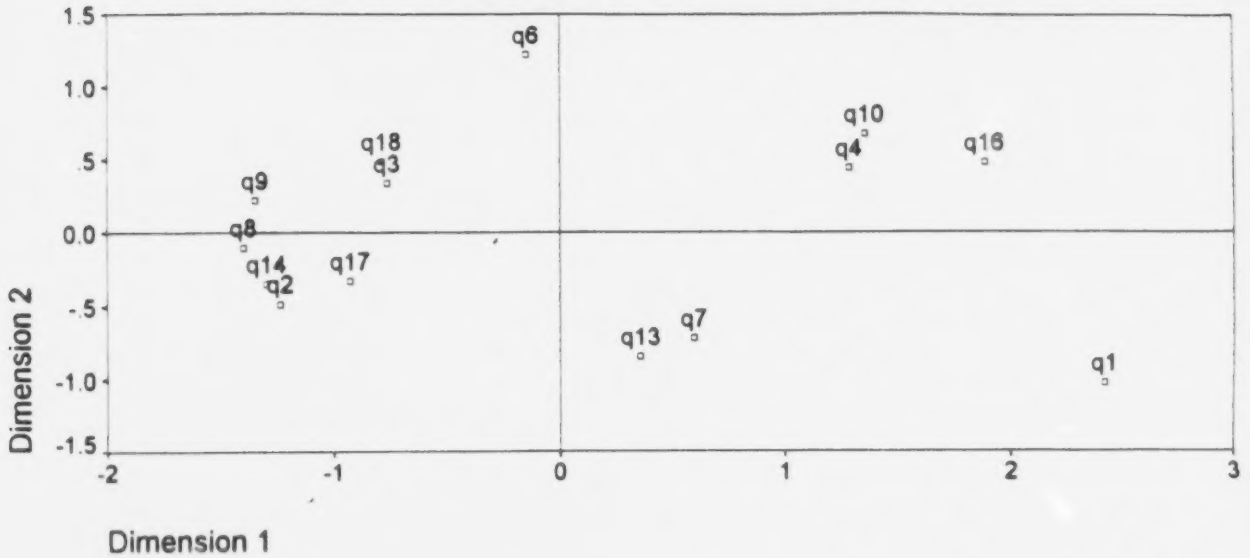
4. You go out with your boyfriend/girlfriend and it doesn't go well.
   A. To help myself feel better I would think about people like me who have the same thing happen.
   B. Many people like me have this happen so it's no big deal.
   C. Is the cause of this due to something about your race?

5. You don't complete all the homework the teacher assigned and you don't get credit.
   A. To help myself feel better I would think about people like me who have similar experiences.
   B. Many people like me don't complete their homework so it's not important.
   C. Is the cause of not getting credit for your incomplete homework due to something about your race?

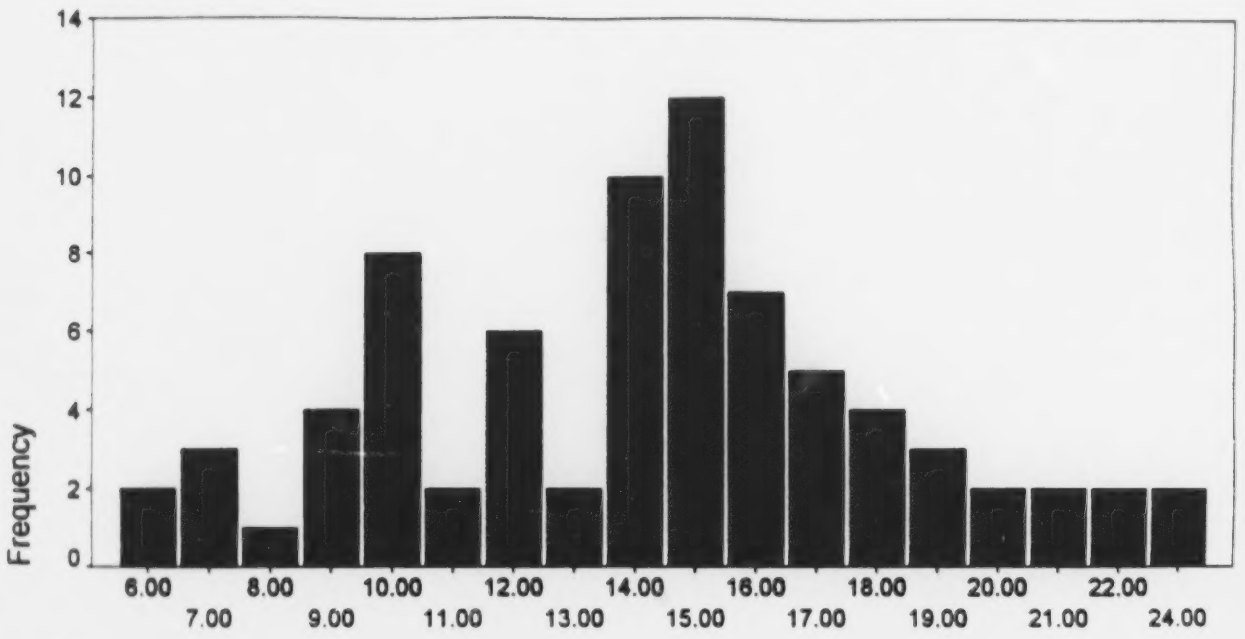
6. You are in need of help and you approach a teacher who does not help you.
   A. To help myself feel better I would think about people like me who also were not helped by teachers.
   B. Many people like me do not get help from teachers so it's not important.
   C. Is the cause of your not being helped due to something about your race?

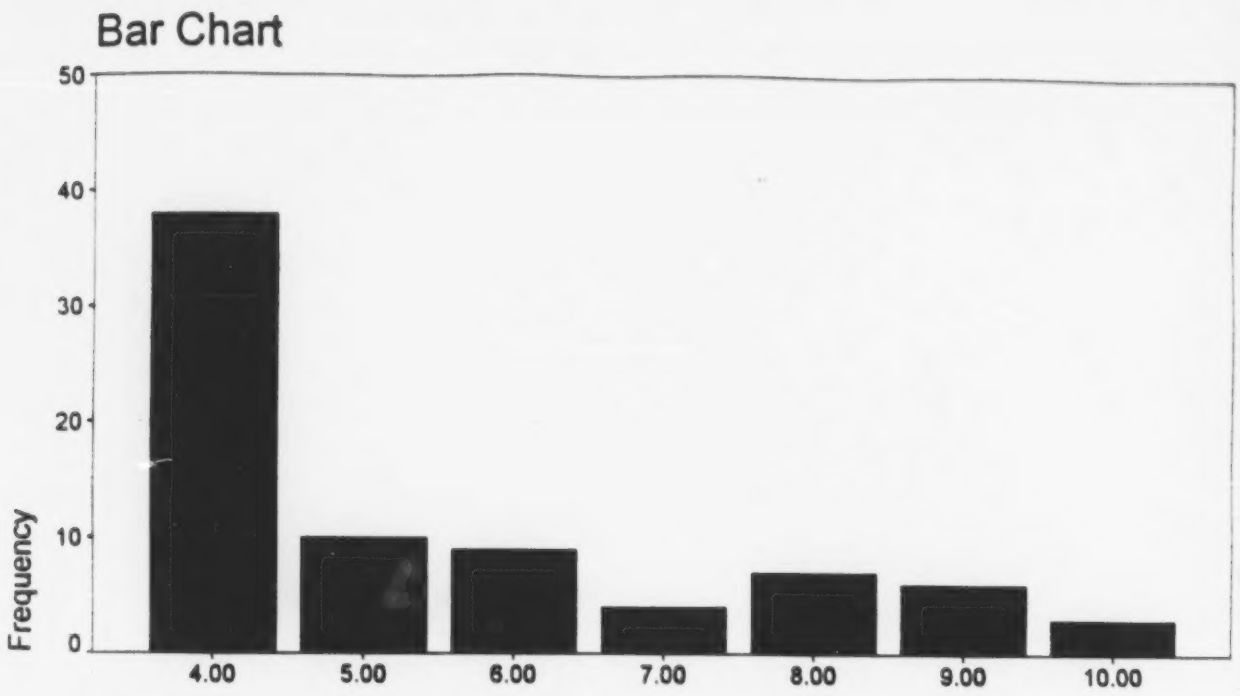
Derived Stimulus Configuration
Euclidean Distance Model

Protective Style Questionnaire 3-Factor Solution

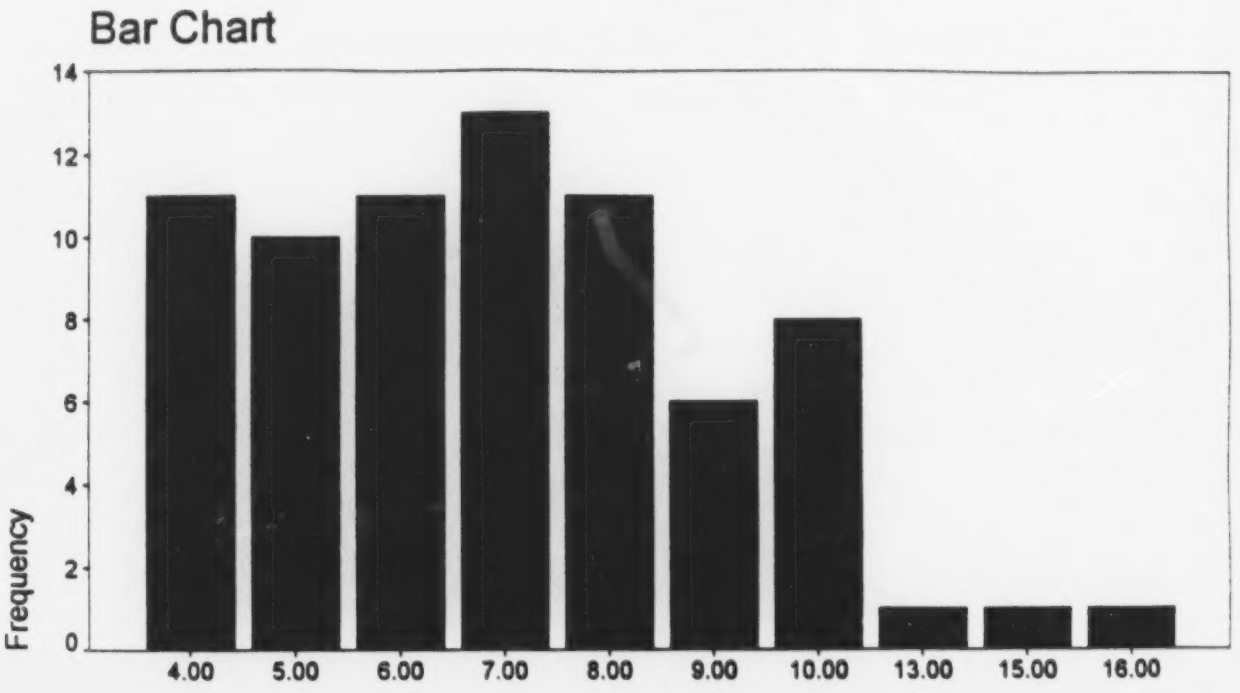


Bar Chart





PSQ B Scale: "Devaluing/Valuing Peformance Selectively



PSQ C Scale: "Racial Prejudice"